

Structure and Structurelessness

From the PWM web site:

Character of the Women's Movement:

- Organic - not a formal structure;

What is the Women's Movement?

After extensive discussions, as the ANCWL and Alliance partners we have agreed that a Women's Movement is a broad front of women's organisations, grassroots organisations of all kinds, feminist oriented groups, researchers, faith based organisations, traditional healers, women involved in policy formulation and programmes.

PWMSA Background

The Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa (PWMSA) is a Not-for-Profit Organisation registration number 051-728-NPO, launched in Bloemfontein on the 8th August 2006... The Movement was launched to create a broad front for development for the women of South Africa - one that would enable women to speak with one voice to address their concerns using a single platform of action irrespective of race, class, religion, political and social standing.

Blade Nzimande, Umsebenzi Online, 15 February 2006:

The struggle for women's emancipation is increasingly being 'BEE'd'. It is for this reason that our media is dominated mainly by glossy magazines of top women, and about the advancement of women in senior managerial ranks and those cutting BEE deals in the capitalist economy.

In the process, the struggles of ordinary working class and poor women in both the urban and rural areas tend to take a back-seat. The heroic and exemplary struggles of these women, in the trade unions, in the stokvels, in burial societies, in street trading, and the progress or otherwise these women are making, do not feature in much of the public discourse.

As a result of the increasing elitist co-option of the progressive women's agenda, the discourses and perspectives on many issues fundamental to women (abuse, rape, exploitation, discrimination, etc) are increasingly being dominated by 'liberal' and 'post-modernist' perspectives that do not adequately reflect the concerns of ordinary working and poor women. Where these concerns are raised within these elitist and liberal perspectives, they tend to be patronising towards ordinary women, and approached in a manner that their plight can only be addressed by middle class women 'activists', 'delivered from above', but not led by the working class and poor women themselves.

From "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," by Jo Freeman, 1973:

FORMAL AND INFORMAL STRUCTURES

Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a structureless group. Any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion. The structure may be flexible; it may vary over time; it may evenly or unevenly distribute tasks, power and resources over the members of the group. But it will be formed regardless of the abilities, personalities, or intentions of the people involved. The very fact that we are individuals, with different talents, predispositions, and backgrounds makes this inevitable. Only if we refused to relate or interact on any basis whatsoever could we approximate structurelessness -- and that is not the nature of a human group.

This means that to strive for a structureless group is as useful, and as deceptive, as to aim at an "objective" news story, "value-free" social science, or a "free" economy. A "*laissez faire*" group is about as realistic as a "*laissez faire*" society; the idea becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can be so easily established because the idea of "structurelessness" does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones.

Similarly "*laissez faire*" philosophy did not prevent the economically powerful from establishing control over wages, prices, and distribution of goods; it only prevented the government from doing so. Thus structurelessness becomes a way of masking power, and within the women's movement is usually most strongly advocated by those who are the most powerful (whether they are conscious of their power or not). As long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who

know the rules. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware.

For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalized. This is not to say that formalization of a structure of a group will destroy the informal structure. It usually doesn't. But it does hinder the informal structure from having predominant control and make available some means of attacking it if the people involved are not at least responsible to the needs of the group at large.

"Structurelessness" is organizationally impossible. We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group, only whether or not to have a formally structured one. Therefore the word will not be used any longer except to refer to the idea it represents. Unstructured will refer to those groups which have not been deliberately structured in a particular manner. Structured will refer to those which have.

A Structured group always has formal structure, and may also have an informal, or covert, structure. It is this informal structure, particularly in Unstructured groups, which forms the basis for elites.

Socialist Victory Only With Proletarian Woman

Clara Zetkin's speech at the Party Congress of the Social Democratic Party of Germany at Gotha on 16 October 1896 sets the theme which will provide the backbone of this ten-part course. Says Zetkin:

"The granting of political equality to women does not change the actual balance of power. The proletarian woman ends up in the proletarian, the bourgeois woman in the bourgeois camp. We must not let ourselves be fooled by Socialist trends in the bourgeois women's movement which last only as long as bourgeois women feel oppressed."

"We must not conduct special women's propaganda, but Socialist agitation among women."

Lenin, 1917

If we do not draw women into public activity, into the militia, into political life; if we do not tear women away from the deadening atmosphere of household and kitchen; then it is impossible to secure real freedom, it is impossible even to build democracy, let alone socialism.

Alexandra Kollontai, 1909:

However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of the contemporary economic and social structure of society without which the liberation of women cannot be complete.

If in certain circumstances the short-term tasks of women of all classes coincide, the final aims of the two camps, which in the long term determine the direction of the movement and the tactics to be used, differ sharply. While for the feminists the achievement of equal rights with men in the framework of the contemporary capitalist world represents a sufficiently concrete end in itself, equal rights at the present time are, for the proletarian women, only a means of advancing the struggle against the economic slavery of the working class. The feminists see men as the main enemy, for men have unjustly seized all rights and privileges for themselves, leaving women only chains and duties. For them a victory is won when a prerogative previously enjoyed exclusively by the male sex is conceded to the 'fair sex'.

Proletarian women have a different attitude. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life. It is true that several specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women, as it is also true that the conditions of hired labour sometimes turn working women into competitors and rivals to men. But in these unfavourable situations, the working class knows who is guilty.

The working woman is first and foremost a member of the working class.
